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SECOND NATURE

by

Joseph M. Solan

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MFA PHOTOGRAPHY PROGRAM
SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTS AND SCIENCES
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
ROCHESTER, NEW YORK
December, 1981

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COLLEGE OF GRAPHIC ARTS AND PHOTOGRAPHY
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Preface

What follows is an attempt to describe what I feel about photography, about the act of photography and about my photographs within the context of a graduate thesis. Technical difficulties preclude the reproduction of all the thesis photographs so I chose to use eight that I felt were most representative of the fabric of the exhibit. When I refer to any of these eight photographs I identify them specifically by title. In two cases I refer to photographs that are not in this report. I have attempted to describe those photographs with enough detail to make my point clearly understood.

Above the Tree Line
An Introduction

Above the tree line, where morning frost is seldom delicate, life is so fragile that one misplaced step can leave its mark forever. The press of humanity on the environment is a delicate and tricky subject to deal with. We are torn by many problems, needs, wants, likes, dislikes, by progress and stagnation, by growth and decay. (When the subject of environment is brought up, we may see ourselves as passengers on a boat which has a limited supply of space and resources.) And we see ourselves as approaching saturation; as coming dangerously close to picking up that proverbial "final straw".

So, what do we do about it? How do we deal with it? Where do we go? Within each of us is the capacity to make a contribution . The magnitude of the contribution is of no consequence. The act of contributing is of utmost significance; and seeing precedes action.

For anyone who has never been above it, the tree line is an awesome experience that one does not forget easily. In one moment remarkably quiet, gentle, crystal clear; in the next dark, windy, foreboding--a snow storm in August. The tree line is a linear demarcation that outlines a geographical point, above which weather conditions are so harsh that growth is severely limited. It is a place that nature seems to have provided for us to stand back from and to see the world in a

larger context. It is a megascopic view of ourselves.

Below the tree line are my photographs. They are, individually, partial statements, half truths. But they are statements taken out of context, from a book that has yet to be completed. They offer some evidence that the events which can be observed above the tree line are occurring below. My concern is ultimately environmental but my photographs speak less of a shared, physical environment than it does a personal, philosophical one. The photographs are an expression of a sense of awe for nature. They are also a pursuit of what I see of ourselves within this second nature of the land.

I was struggling for a long time to come up with a short, simple statement to describe my work when I came across this description of Camille Pissarro's paintings: "...the light he loved best--a gray light, part silver, part stone...often melancholy."¹

¹Mark Stevens, "Pissarro the Patriarch", Newsweek (June 1, 1981): 76, 77.

THESIS PROPOSAL

TITLE: A SECOND NATURE

SUBMITTED BY: JOSEPH SOLAN

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TORONTO, CANADA

PURPOSE: To make photographic landscapes, as altered by man, and to explore the ways in which the natural and the artificial interact visually and emotionally.

FEBRUARY 11, 1980

SCOPE AND BACKGROUND

There are certain alterations that man makes to his environment to adapt it to his needs. In so doing he juxtaposes his "artificial" environment with the natural, and, in the union of these two conditions, he introduces a landscape with a new quality, a "second nature". It is a landscape in a state of perpetual tension, but full of humanity and spirituality.

For many years I have noted that there are some very particular places to which I am attracted, but was never quite aware of that essential feature which drew my attention. I have come to realize that there is an intrinsic quality to certain places which act as visual keys or catalysts to my memory and experience that calls for a response. The response is, typically, a photograph.

All of our senses are stimulated in much the same way. When we listen to music we are not moved by the sound of a simple tone but by the placement of particular tones next to each other. In much the same way, when we see, we are moved by particular combinations of light, shade, color (tone) and shape which induces an emotional state drawn from experience. And, in the musical sense, when each tone is played clearly it facilitates understanding. I intend the thesis work to be a kind of listening/seeing by which my emotions and experiences can be clearly expressed. In so doing I may leave the door open for continued exploration.

PROCEDURE

I am planning to photograph through spring and summer with the thesis show of approximately 30 prints in early fall. The places I will be photographing will be both urban and rural areas, but I will be concentrating, for a period of time, in a region of the Catskill Mts. near Albany. This will provide me with the opportunity to experience long periods of solitude (a distraction-free environment) which will encourage thoughtful seeing/listening.

I will be working with a 4x5 view camera, using both B&W and color films. For the sake of flexibility I will also keep a 35mm camera on hand.

An approach to photographing this body of work might have been to imagine simple things or ideas and set out to find or create them in some orderly way. To do so would have required me to rationalize some sort of symbol system or some parameters within which to work, and then stick with it. I might have come up with procedures for filling a frame, or marking the landscape, or recording data. I could have photographed only those kinds of landscapes that fall into a category or landscapes that have been acted upon in a very specific way. Surely this would have made the photographs easier to understand.

Until now I never fully understood the problem with this kind of thinking, although I have always felt that there was a problem. To have established a mechanism would have created a rigid personal work habit that resists freedom of thought and freedom of action. The act of photographing is a selection process filtered through our own thoughts and experience. The mechanism, which cannot be denied, is simply an extension of ourselves and our tools.

My intention was to make, in this thesis, a body of work that is both a reflection of my relationship with nature, and an exploration of that characteristic that I have often recognized in the land but was only aware of without physically seeing or hearing it. But, before I attempt to deal with those

two objectives separately, I should deal with that which is familiar to us and how familiarity breaks down our perception. "Everyday one grows mute with familiarity, so known they become unknown."²

Artists have a unique gift in that they see and hear things that the ordinary person, seemingly, does not perceive. Yet, we all look at the same things. Anyone who has observed young children is reminded of the excitement at seeing something for the first time. It is a kind of excitement that is very similar to what you feel when you make a photograph that makes you say, "yes-- that's it." The photograph is something new--a statement of recognition.

...no individual is free to describe nature with absolute impartiality but is constrained to certain modes of interpretation even while he thinks himself most free.³

I took advantage of the opportunity to show my incomplete thesis photographs to a person whose profession is in engineering, and who lives in the suburbs of Long Island in a neatly maintained low ranch with a carefully manicured lawn and shrubbery. He has a very strong appreciation for the arts but tends to be analytical and mechanically influenced in his ability to see. As I later realized, he also experiences reality

²John Fowles, "Seeing Nature Whole", Harper's (November, 1979): 51.

³Edward T. Hall, The Hidden Dimension (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1966): 92.

in terms of the neatly structured world he has created for himself. His home, his personally created environment, forms the basis of his perception of the rest of the world. All of his judgments are based on what he knows about his own personal environment, and what he knows is what he feels most comfortable with.

The most obvious photographs were easy for him to deal with; stone retaining wall holding back a muddy yard, a steel bridge crossing a river gorge, a concrete section of a frozen canal. But then he came to a photograph that had him stumped. It was taken in a park and was a photograph of a small enclosed meadow with a perfectly circular flower patch in the center of a closely cut field of grass and outlined with carefully placed hedges. It looked quite natural to him because in his own environment there is no room for random placement. He simply could not see anything artificial until it was pointed out to him.

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We cannot afford to be indiscriminant and scientifically selective. Since we experience everything as a whole, in context with the rest of the world, we cannot become familiar with any one thing without losing the perspective of its environment; without considerable cost. The motivation for high selectivity is to understand nature. But, for the purpose of

understanding, science tends to isolate individual objects to be picked apart. We become so familiar with isolated objects that they recede into the background. In our daily routine we no longer see, hear or feel things the way they were first experienced.

John Fowles describes this "scientific" quest for understanding nature as being very costly:

The particular cost of understanding the mechanism of nature, of having so successfully itemized and pigeonholed it, is in his ability to live with and care for it — and not to see it as enemy, challenge, defiance. Selection from total reality is no less necessary in science than it is in art; but outside those domains (in both of which the final test of selection is utility or yield, to our own species) it seriously distorts and limits any worthwhile relationship.⁴

It is much like the route we travel to work each day. Everyone sees it differently. But, after so many years of traveling the same route, few people can describe it with very much detail.

Just as poets choose from common speech, the visual artist must choose from common occurrence.⁵ Whether it is seeing, hearing, touching or any combination of sense, we are observers of our environment. As artists, we have the opportunity to render things as we personally experience them. The rendering is an evolving process by which the object and place we are seeing is tempered by what we know and all that we have experienced. That

⁴Fowles, "Seeing Nature Whole", p. 51

⁵Kenneth Clark, Landscape Into Art (New York: Harper & Row 1979) p. 109.

tempering is, at the same time, both intuitive and evident.

It is very difficult for human beings to detach themselves (their consciousness) in the interest of objectivity, without the costly loss of a human perception of our lives. Only the greatest scientists have been able to maintain a truly objective posture in their exploration and still remain fully aware of their world,

There appears to be a belief among photographers that everything that can be photographed, has been done. (That is a bit like saying every apple that is to be eaten has been). So the solution is to invent something, use a gimmick, create a trend. The feeling is that if we plasticize our vision, or build uncertain models of what we think we see, we will arrive at some kind of intellectual nirvana (or get rich). This is approaching something called decadence. Thomas Pynchon describes decadence as the falling away from what is human; and the further we fall the more we foist off our lost humanity on inanimate objects and abstract ideas.⁶ Decadence may be awfully strong term, but as artists, we often have to deal with ourselves and our work in very drastic ways. This is the only way of breaking away the barriers to clear and rational thought.

⁶Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York; Viking Press 1973) p. 182.

What would be the result if, instead of regarding the author's images as literary conventions, we were to examine them very closely as highly patterned reminder systems which released memories?...It must be remembered that communications are on many levels: what is relevant on one level may not be on another.⁷

Since its inception, the photograph has been a tool of remembrance. Thirty years after Dagguere and Niepce, Civil War soldiers carried tintypes of their loved ones; where before a scarf, a lock of hair or a pressed flower had to do. Eighty years later, after the liberation of Paris from the Nazi occupation, an American soldier found his way to Picasso's studio. He asked Picasso why he made such strange paintings. Picasso replied by asking the soldier if he had a photograph of his wife or girlfriend. The soldier took one from his wallet and handed it to him. He studied it awhile and finally said, "She is very pretty but so small." Picasso's work was an integral part of his life and his experience. It was as much a vestige of his life as was that soldier's snapshot. But the differences in the levels of communication are as distinct as those between a musical note and a symphony.

I can't say where in that broad spectrum of communication my photographs can be placed. I can say what I believe to be the difference between the opposite ends. It is a difference of intention. A "snapshot" is made as an aid in remembering. The

⁷Hall, Hidden Dimension p. 94.

act of making it and the physical result are of little consequence as long as there is something. A fine work of art becomes an instrument of recognition by virtue of its performance. It becomes a dialogue between the artist and his audience.

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There have been many false starts at describing the kind of dialogue I hope for my photographs to create. I noted in my thesis proposal that I have known for years that there are particular places to which I am attracted. But I was never able to pin down that essential feature that caught my attention. I have now come to understand at least two aspects of my interest in the places that I photograph .

The first is, as the title states, the second nature of the place. There is a very essential condition that becomes a part of the land when man imposes his structures. It is a condition that cannot exist without the interplay of the natural and the artificial. That condition is made evident by the remarkable adaptability of the natural and the stubborn inflexibility of the man-made. The effect on the land as a whole is apparent decay; the natural grows back faithfully every spring but the man-made just crumbles. The photograph is the result of a sense of awe at that power of nature.

The other aspect is one I could call Deja Vu. It is not

a feeling (as the phenomenon is often described) but a recognition of a quality in the land that reflects physical and emotional states that have been stored deep inside of me. I have always had the nagging feeling that much of what I see and hear is so deeply stored away that it is irretrievable. It is like a dream that you know you have had but cannot recall enough of the images to describe it. Then, all of a sudden, I am standing at the side of a road, or in an alley, or under a bridge, or on a frozen canal and there is a spark of recognition. The place becomes catalyst to memory, a photograph is made, the photograph becomes catalyst to dialogue.

The Use of Color

At the beginning there was no clear cut rationale for using color film with black & white, except that I wanted to see how well I worked while switching from one to the other. It seems that working this way has been regarded as something like trying to change gears without a clutch. In some cases it is regarded with downright contempt. I have never quite understood this attitude.

In order to articulate an idea perfectly, one must clearly define every element of the photograph. There are occasions when color is so tightly bound to form that it cannot be denied. As an artist I assume the right to choose my palette. We construct an image of tones that play against one another in the formation of a unified statement. The choices are sometimes arbitrary and sometimes very methodical; but always at the discretion of the artist. The result is a clear expression of the statement.

"Color in itself expresses something."
--Van Gogh

When I realized I was having no difficulty working with color and black & white in the field, I expected a problem when the time came to hang the show. Careful, but severe, editing

resolved that problem. I was very satisfied with the result.

The question is; why did it work so well? I think there are two reasons. The first and most important is the quality of the light I usually use to photograph. The kind of light is the same in both color and black & white which helps to unify the whole project. It is very subdued ("part silver, part stone"), often late in the day, sometimes overcast or even rainy. The second is the way in which I work with color film. Because of the light I often use, exposure times must be very long. I do not pay very much attention to Kodak's limitations. This has a peculiar effect on the film, calling for strange filter combinations while printing. There were also many cases where this use of the film backfired, leaving me with several boxes of unprintable negatives.

In the end, I felt it was an essential part of the body of work. Most importantly, it made me think more about what happens in the interim between exposing the negative and making the print. With black & white film I plan at the time of the exposure how the photograph should look. Color film forces me to surrender some of that control to the film itself. As a Kodak ad might say, "What you see is what you get". However, the way I was exposing the film caused peculiar shifts in color so that different kinds of decisions had to be made while printing. These decisions later affected the decisions about hanging the show.

Thesis Sharing

Two important issues were raised at the thesis sharing that were never really resolved or answered. Now that I have had time to think about them, I feel that I can say more about them.

The first is, again, the issue of color. But the question that was asked was: what motivated the choice of color film over black & white? I touched on this in the preceding section, but I feel it would serve some purpose to elaborate here in order to deal with how I felt about the thesis sharing. When the question was asked I knew I had not adequately prepared for the questions that might be raised at the sharing. I believe I knew all along what motivated me, but the answer was just not there. The reply was a vague sketch of some technical details that were occurring in the prints. A thesis board member suggested that the motivation was more intuitive at the time and rationalization came later. That is very true, but by that time I should have had the rationalization. It was not until the next day (of course!) that the answer became clear in my mind. It lies in some of the very first research that I started at the beginning of the thesis.

The first thing I wanted to do, since I was planning to make photographic landscapes, was to look up the etymology of the word "landscape". The word is derived from the 17th century

Dutch word "landschap". It breaks down into "land", which means the same in English, and "-schap" or "-ship", which comes from the base of the word "scieppen" meaning to create, make. When the suffix "-schap" or "-ship" is added to a noun, it forms a noun meaning the quality, condition or state of that object described in the original word. So I intended to use color and black & white in a way that would most accurately and clearly delineate that quality or condition of the land, and that state of mind involved with being part of it. The dirt road, with the half melted snow exposing muddy red clay, shrouded in a greenish fog, leaves and stone glistening from the heavy mist, would never have been so cool; would never have said so much in tones of silver. I used color as a descriptive tool, an abstract dimension of simple geometry.

There was some discussion as to whether there is really an issue of the man-made and the natural, or some other unique quality. It was suggested that perhaps the landscapes are really mind-made. That may be a more accurate description than I ever realized. The coexistence of the natural and the artificial has become "...so known (it is) unknown..."⁸; it is the first nature of the land. The second nature is the result of the introduction of myself, my own "mind-scapes" into the land

⁸Fowles, "Seeing Nature Whole", p.51

This new twist does not change the photograph. It sheds new light on the reasons for the pictures. I believe that somehow I knew about that aspect all along but never came to terms with it. The two most potent examples of this are in this report . "The Door" was a photograph that I had carried in my mind for a long time after reading H.G. Wells' A Door in the Wall. It just turned up one day in an alley. The "Frozen Canal II" was the result of an assignment to make one photograph that was clearly objective and one that was clearly subjective. The result was "Frozen Canal I" and "Frozen Canal II". At the time I did not think it was successful. (I still don't--neither one is clearly objective.) These photographs represent two extremes; the real, the land, its condition, its first nature--the embodiment of an essential quality of that coexistence of the natural and the artificial. The other extreme is a sense of mystery about ourselves; about how our world comes together and our place in it. "The Door" and "Frozen Canal II", all of the photographs, reflect slightly different aspects of the mystery and the reality of the landscape. I conclude that a landscape is not entirely real, it is an interpolation of what we see, what we know and what we feel.

Conclusion

Kenneth Clark once described landscape painting as an expression of love. I see my photographs, with some kind of emotion akin to love. I believe all of us view our art work with some sort of emotional fever (backdrop). Even now I don't really want to acknowledge it as that particular emotion. But what needs to be said is: what I am to these photographs and what are these photographs to me. Autobiography is too simple a label - it doesn't say enough. The foundations of my photography is, at least in part, however, autobiographical.

There is a compelling element of the land that shows up in my photographs which could be traced to childhood recollections. The rural nature of my home as a child provided me with a haven; places to be alone. As the seventh child in a family of eight children it was very important for me to be alone. At times I even felt closer to these places than to my family. Over a period of time a synthesis took place in which I could not distinguish myself from the land. The tree, the lake, the sky all became my other "family". As I grew up I witnessed the destruction of all these places by population growth; what I perceived as decay spreading from the city. What seems to have happened is that those places that were once real and tangible are now internalized - mindscapes ("inscapes", according to Hopkins). Now, they become real (reborn?) through my photographs.

Interestingly the most uncommon photographs have occurred in the most common places. ("The Door" in an alley behind some industrial buildings; "Stream" at a roadside where most people would never think to stop - or even look.) When I find and photograph a place like this something odd transpires. I see a landscape that engulfs me like an offshore breeze at a crowded beach. If I close my eyes I perceive no one but the wind and the sea - I am alone. Likewise, when I see, not just look, but when I really see I am engulfed and no one else is there.

In my photographs I rely heavily on extended foregrounds as a "guide" into the landscape. Just as when we are walking along any route, what is most immediately important is that which is most directly in front of us. Obviously we must pass that point before we can go anywhere else. But how we pass it; what takes place when we pass it can influence our perception of the rest of the journey. In "Stream", for instance we are first met by a foreground that is quite ephemeral, transitory as transitory as a child's world, then we are met by something very much the opposite, stable and stationery; a formation of stone shaped by the motion of water; accented by a cable that mimics a fallen branch. Later in Frozen Canal II, we are confronted by part of a concrete wall, cracked and chipped - a jumping off place to something eternal like the universe.

Again, my first concern is environmental. The most positive

response to a concern is action. In my case the action is a photograph. Gerard Manley Hopkins would tell us that it is activity that reveals something of ourselves.

Hopkins also held that it is in activity, in characteristic action, that the individual reveals his inscape, and he delights in dynamism:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
 As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
 Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
 Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
 Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
 Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
 Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells;
 Crying What I do is me: for that I came.⁹

⁹John Pick, A Hopkins Reader (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953)p. xviii

THE DOOR
Rochester, N.Y.

"Our business is to see
what we can and render it."

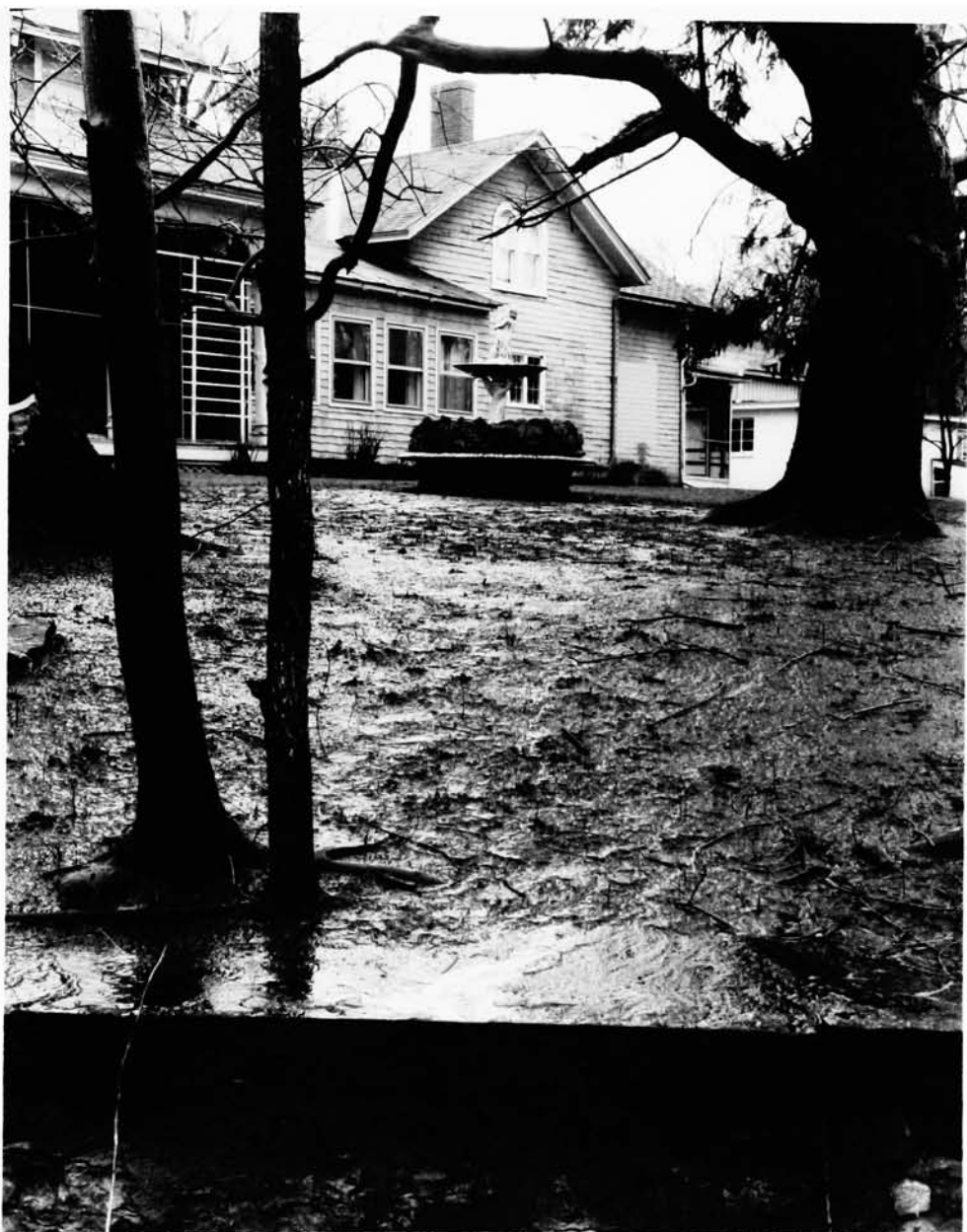
--H.G. Wells



OLANA
Hudson, N.Y.



NEAR SCHOEN PLACE
Pittsford, N.Y.



GENESEE CROSSING
Rochester, N.Y.



UNDER THE
RIP VAN WINKLE BRIDGE
Catskill, N.Y.



STREAM
Tannersville, N.Y.



FROZEN CANAL I
Bushnell's Basin, N.Y.



FROZEN CANAL II
Bushnell's Basin, N.Y.

"The mystery of the universe
is that it is comprehensible."
--Albert Einstein



I prize in seeing a great deal.
In the visual image we possess life.
We speak too much, we should
speak less and draw more.
As for myself, I should like to renounce
the word, and speak only in images,
as does plastic nature.
This fig tree,
this snake,
this cocoon exposed to the sun
in front of this window,
all these things are secret signs; and those
who could decipher their true meaning
could do without any spoken or written
language in the future --
There is in the word something so futile,
so pointless,
I am almost tempted to say,
so ridiculous . . .

--Goethe

Afterward

I believe I accomplished what I set out to do: to explore, in photographic landscapes, the ways in which the natural and the artificial interact visually and emotionally. However, there is still more to do. It is an open ended exploration. At the end of a journey like this, what matters, after all, is the experience of getting there.

"Searching is everything."

--Wynn Bullock

Technical Considerations

Film (4x5): Tri-X
VPS Vericolor
VPL Vericolor

Developer: FG-7, Developed by inspection
C-41, Machine processed

Papers: Polycontrast F (thesis show)
Polycontrast A (thesis report)
Ektacolor 74 N

Developer: Wynn Bullock's Amidol Formula
 water - $\frac{1}{2}$ gal
 sodium sulfite - 3 tbsp.
 Amidol - 2 tsp.
 potassium bromide (10% sol.) - 10cc
 BB solution (anti-fog) - 10cc
 citric acid - $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp.
 To make a 10% solution--dissolve 10
 grams in 900cc of water, add water to
 make 1000cc.

Color paper machine processed

Camera: Tachihara 4x5

Lens: Goerz Dagor $6\frac{1}{2}$ "
Goerz Dagor $8\frac{1}{4}$ "

GLOSSARY

emotion n. a) strong feeling; excitement b) the state or capability of having the feelings aroused to the point of awareness

landscape n. (17th c. art borrowing from the Dutch *lanschap*: *land*=land and *-schap*= -ship.)

1. a picture representing a section of natural, inland scenery, as of prairie, woodland, mountains etc.
2. the branch of painting, photography etc. dealing with such pictures
3. the expanse of natural scenery seen by the eye in one view
- *4. an image that shows the quality, condition or state of the land in context of city, country or sea

nature n. the essential character of a thing, quality or qualities that make something what it is; essence

Olana n. (from the arabic word meaning home place) The home of Frederick Church of the Hudson River School of Painters. The house was constructed on a hill overlooking the Hudson River. The hill was completely "landscaped" in such a way that when Church looked out of a huge window in his living room the view was in perfect balance and harmony like his paintings

-ship (ME. -schippe; AS. -scip, from base of *scieppen*, to create, make)
a suffix added to nouns to form nouns meaning the quality, condition or state of.....

*My own definition

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